



Chapter 1

The Bridge

It is January and the third straight week of temperatures hovering in the single digits-- on both sides of zero. A late dinner of meat, dumplings, and gravy hangs in my gut like a brick. It is dark out, but a walk usually helps settle dinner. I like the dark; I can make faces about my day and no one can see. We live in tourist country, so although there are three houses on the half-mile walk to the river, only one has an occupant, and a yard light. I slip on my big coat and my warmest hat and gloves—and the big boots. They're clunky to walk in, but better than having cold toes.

Slamming the garage door echoes for what seems like a minute and its clear I won't be sneaking up on anything tonight. I pause outside the door, hearing the constant rush of the rapids even though it's a half mile away. The crisp cold is the kind that makes sound travel for miles and the louder the rapids sound tells me about how long I'll be able to stay out before getting too cold. The cold feels good on my cheeks and prickles my throat as I take my first big breath of the cold air, feeling it all the way to my lungs. I begin my walk, the

snow squeaking under my boots with each step, assaulting my ears with the sharp, unnatural sound. But I find a nice rhythm in my pace and try to ignore it.

I am completely confident that I am the only moving, living thing out for miles. I have run, walked, biked, and driven in every manner of vehicle every inch of these roads and I've explored every tree in these woods my entire childhood. I could find my way home in the dark a mile through the swamp behind our house without the moon. I am fearless here ...and only here. There are many mysteries in the world, but not here. Not to me. Not now.

I am walking although my eyes have yet to adjust. Slowly the grey becomes the clear black sky, complete with twinkling stars, and the snowy ground becomes a dark blue. I am black and the trees are black against the dark blue that is everywhere. Rounding our driveway on to the road, I can see the farthest reaches of our neighbor's yard light. It's an older blueish light. I sometimes sit in a snowbank just far away enough to not be seen and watch the snow fall in and out of its light. It's mesmerizing; like being hypnotized by driving with high beams in a thick snowstorm. But it's clear tonight, so I follow the edge of the light around the corner to the paved road and down the hill.

The bridge is just out of reach of the neighbor's light too, although her house is the closest to it. On the other side of the road is an old olive-green summer home. The far side of the bridge is undeveloped riparian habitat that floods several times a year. This road, this time of night there won't be any cars. The bridge is concrete with metal railings and ample areas between the braces to allow melting or plowed snow to fall directly into the river. I lean on the railing like a regular patron at a bar, with my foot on the lowest railing, forearms resting on the top. The water is black even on the brightest summer day-- from the tannins

in the local pine trees, they say-- and it is tar-black now. I can't see the water moving, although the sound of the rapids is loud and clear. "The rapids" is little more than water gushing over the roller dam made of rocks just 100 feet upriver from the bridge. On a moonlit night, the water rolling over the roller dam makes quite a spectacle, catching and reflecting the light more in the faster moving water, appearing to almost shimmer. But tonight, it's only the stars and the black river flowing beneath me.

The constant rush of the rapids makes me feel like it's safe to think. Safe to even talk quietly out loud. It's like static; and on a cold night like tonight where sound is so amplified, I feel like it's safe to reach and relive the most treasured, and most embarrassing parts of my day. The compliment received out of nowhere just when I was convinced no one noticed, the dumb thing I said in return, the moments when I wish I were cooler, braver, more confident.

I take my foot off the railing and kick some hardened snow clumps into the water. They splash and bob, then disappear under the bridge. I walk to the other side and wait. It's about four seconds before the snow flows out on the current. I watch it as long as I can before it disappears into more blackness downstream. I stare for a long time at the downstream, wondering about its journey. How long will it take to melt into the dark waters? How far downstream will it get? How far away from here will I get? Where will my life take me? Will I ever leave here?

I shake my head, as I never get the answers to such questions, even when they're worded in the shape of a prayer, complete with tears. Mostly I want to know how much of the nonsense of today will really matter in 5 years. The friends we make and keep and lose, the actions and repercussions of selfish people, the constant growing list of mistakes...

I kick more frozen snow over the edge and watch every piece rise to the surface, the smaller ones first. The bigger ones seem to take their time, being more lackadaisical about reappearing, almost confident in this next journey I've jumpstarted for them. The smaller ones seem frantic about getting back into the air, struggling to see, trying to control the unknown.

The last bit of snow I kick reminds me of how cold it really is because it hurts my toes to kick it free from where it has melded to the bridge. Time to go home. No mysteries of the future and my place in it are going to be further solved tonight. There's always tomorrow.

On the way home, as the rushing rapids gets only slightly quieter and the squeak of my boots gets louder, I wonder if there are other bridges, other rapids, other people in a seemingly mundane existence searching for answers. Will I ever meet any of them?

I quiet the questions and look up at the stars. Right where I left them. I smile, as if I had any control over that at all whatsoever. Well, just because I can't control them doesn't mean I can't enjoy them. Just like this cold, peaceful night that I'm ruining with my clunky, squeaky footfalls. I stop in the middle of the road that only 100 people know about and 40 people travel annually, and most of that my family, and most of that on Christmas. I slowly turn in a circle, taking in everything. The 100 shades of black and blue. Which stars twinkle

different colors and which stars just flicker like a dying candle. The perfect silhouette of each branch on each tree, just as it is in the daylight, here in the darkness too.

...and as I study everything, I realize I'm taking a picture. I'm memorizing every detail for those days when I can't calm the questions. For those times when I don't have time to take a walk in the dark. For those times when my questions of yesterday have been answered but I'm too far away to come home when I need a walk. For the times I have trouble getting to sleep because I'm worried about things that *will* matter in 5 years.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, the cold burning my throat, and hold it for as long as I can. And for a moment, I'm just happy to be in the dark, in the cold, with a warm house that I know is there somewhere in the blackness in front of me, and inside it are people who love me. And with any luck, they've saved me some dessert.